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THE RECREATIONAL VALUE OF RELIGION

FREDERIC SIEDENBURG, S.J.
Loyola University

ANENT COMMUNITY CENTERS

At the outset let me say that I take the words "recreation" and "religion" in their widest sense and perhaps in their truest. "Religion" comes from two Latin words, *re* and *ligo* "to rebind." It is the conscious acknowledgment of the dependence, the intrinsic binding of the creature to the Creator; the acknowledgment of the effect to the cause; the allegiance of the human spirit to its First Cause or, if you will, its Creator God. If the law of causality has any logical force and we and the world are always acting as if it had, it must be admitted that ultimately there must be a First Cause, a Prime Mover, whom I shall call God. Religion is the practical acknowledgment of this truth. It finds its highest expression in the free acknowledgment of man, its lowest in the necessary obedience to the laws of nature in the least of creatures. Hence it has been said with truth that man can rise, "from nature up to nature's God." Or as the poet has beautifully phrased it:

Lo! the poor Indian, whose untutored mind,
Sees God in clouds or hears him in the wind.
Whose soul proud science never taught to stray
Far as the solar walk or milky way.

The man who pretends to ignore religion, or even the so-called atheist, must admit that there are times, serious moments in the life of every thinking man, when he asks the all mysterious "whence" and the all important "whither." Hence religion, aside from its dogmatic or denominational aspect, has a psychic and a philosophic side which no educator can deny or even obscure. The normal expressions of religion lift man from the groveling earth and the madding crowd; its highest expressions lift him to the heavens and to communion with invisible spirits. Here the

rational man, with his wonderful faculties of memory, will, and understanding, finds his native sphere of action; here he parts company with his lower self and his fellowship with the brute and material creation. Hence religion is a synonym for what is best in man and his aspirations; it crystallizes for him the true, the good, and the beautiful.

But how has this religion, this link between the human and the divine, a recreational value? When we analyze the word "recreation" we find that it means "to re-create," "to make new," "to revitalize," "to rebuild." Recreation in itself can make use of any of a thousand means. If its effect is to rejuvenate the body or revive the mind, it is recreation. As a matter of fact it may have been a brown study or manual labor. Religion's highest recreational function consists in this, that it lifts the mind and heart from the humdrum, the noise, the turmoil, the commonplaces of life, to the calm, consoling strata of another world. These recreate the body as well as the mind because they bring change, variety, and forgetfulness of the pressing present, which are the very substance of recreation. But let us come down to earth.

How can religion be of value to a community center in terms of recreation? For after all the work of a community center must be expressed in terms of recreation. The reading, studying, singing and dancing, club activities, domestic science, and the manual arts must be made attractive; they must recreate if they are to succeed. This is particularly true of a school center which is conducted at night when the attendants are more or less fatigued and have borne the burden and heat of the day. If what is offered is not a recreation it will lose its appeal and is doomed to failure. A community center must be a place of recreation first and last.

In claiming a recreational value for religion, I do not wish to say that recreation is religion's prime function. I would rather say that it is its by-product. The essence of religion, as was said before, is a personal affair between Creator and creature, and this relationship exists primarily through the worship of the Creator and in the service of our fellow-men.

In carrying out the essentials of religion, men from the earliest ages have used human agencies and human things; they have

dignified these creatures in the service of God and, at the same time, exalted themselves with ideals and service that brought with them, as a by-product, the very soul of recreation. When the children of Israel chanted their canticles they were refreshed in body as well as in spirit; when they praised Jehovah they at the same time lifted themselves into the realms of a higher world; they recreated themselves. When Abel and Abraham offered sacrifice to the Almighty they at the same time attuned their spirits to generous impulses, which in the very nature of things affected their generosity to their fellow-men. They recreated themselves and their fellows. When the Jew or the Gentile fulfils his laws of charity toward the poor and the oppressed and the stranger within his gates he may be actuated by hope of a future reward as a denizen of heaven, but he makes himself at the same time a better citizen of earth. His religion emphasizes and promotes his social as well as his individual progress, and with the vision of hope, born of religion, he triumphs over the failures of life, assuages its pains, and turns its sorrows into joy. In a word, religion recreates him.

What is true of the religion of the old dispensation is eminently true of the new, for here we have love instead of law and mercy instead of justice. The heaviest burdens of life are those that press upon the mind and heart; they are psychic and intangible and beyond the succor of creature-comforts. They must be lifted by a psychic and intangible power, and that power is no other than religion. There is worldly wisdom as well as divine inspiration in the invitation of Christ: "Come to me all ye that labor and are heavy burdened and I will refresh you." Here is recreational value raised to the highest power. The experience of the individual and the history of the race proclaim this with a common voice and make proof unnecessary.

Recreational value is not the only by-product of religion. On account of the intrinsic connection of body and soul and the fact that the supernatural life is built upon the natural, the church has for the most part, in its ministrations, fostered every social and economic progress. Thus if we turn the pages of church history we will find that she was the fostering mother of social centers over a thousand years ago.

In Ireland, way back in the fifth century, the people were attracted to settle around the Christian abbeys, and under the influence of such master-characters as St. Bridget and St. Columbkille these abbeys in a short time developed the arts and crafts, the social sense, and the recreational advantages of a modern settlement house.

By the seventh century, the Benedictines, priests, and friars had established schools and monasteries throughout Europe, and these were the forerunners of civilization until they were destroyed by hostile hands. Moreover, these institutions were in the truest sense community centers on a large scale. Besides focusing the religious life of the neighborhood, they were primary school and college; they taught agriculture and handicraft; they were the public libraries and in a limited degree circulated the books of that period; they staged plays and pageants in which the whole community took part, either as actors or musicians or stage people. In a word, they were the centers of religion, culture, and recreation. More than this, the prior-superior often represented the state and the law, and was the judge of their misconduct or the arbiter of their disputes.

The monastery as well as the church was considered the property of all the faithful, and hence the poor, the distressed, and the traveler naturally turned to its doors for relief and turned not in vain. Today we would call such an institution a charity bureau, a legal-aid society, a municipal lodging-house, all in one. It was all this and more, for it was free from the investigations and humiliations necessarily connected with our modern institutions.

No wonder Europe was poor when these ennobling and beneficent institutions were no more! No wonder we have lost the keen social sense and community conscience which they fostered!

The community consciousness received its death blow by the doctrines of individualism, preached in religion by the reformers of the sixteenth century, in politics by Cromwell and his cohorts in the seventeenth century, and by Ricardo and Adam Smith by the laissez faire school of economics in the eighteenth century. With the advent of the industrial revolution and materialistic capital, the worship of the individual reached its zenith, and the social sense was buried. Today with might and main we are trying to

bring the world back to the social consciousness which flourished in the Middle Ages, due primarily to the religious doctrine of the brotherhood of men.

In colonial America we had examples, in a degree, of this social consciousness, where the Pilgrims of Massachusetts or the Cavaliers of Maryland grouped themselves around their houses of worship, making them the centers of the community. With the development of the country the church gradually gave way to the town hall as the center of community life, and with the march of time and the change of circumstances the town hall in turn gave way to the schoolhouse. Today we are reverting to the schoolhouse to teach anew the present generation a needed lesson in community thought, feeling, and action.

But we are more concerned about the ordinary and social recreational attributes which play a part in the program of every community center. I take it that the chief functions of a community center are exercised when we teach and encourage citizenship, learning, art, dramatics, singing, dancing, and the manual arts; and I contend that, in each and every one of these, practical religion has ever stimulated and promoted them in a far higher degree than we are perhaps willing to admit.

To begin with citizenship; it has been truly said of religion that it is the foundation and bulwark of citizenship. Religion not only teaches the responsibilities of man to his Maker but with equal force teaches the responsibilities of man to his neighbor. The second commandment is like unto the first: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

The essence of citizenship consists in conspiring under authority with your fellow-man by common means to a common good. This demands a sacred regard of correlative rights and duties and of these rights and duties religion is the supreme criterion and sanction. A citizen is a unit in an organized group, and organization demands order, law, and sanction, and only religion, which is the acknowledgment of the eternal order of things, can give these three essentials.

The lawgivers of the world, pagan, Jew, and Christian, give common assent of the value of religion to the stability of the state.

Citizenship is impossible without morality and morality is impossible without religion. Washington in his farewell address reminds us that it is impossible to expect that our Republic should live unless it rests on the solid foundations of morality.

Religion, it is true, holds up the Ten Commandments as the basis of the religious life, but there is no better basis for citizenship. Could the Ten Commandments be put into practice universally in our civic life, we would in a fortnight reach the millennium of government and citizenship; in fact, universal brotherhood would be at hand. Custom and patriotic impulse and legislation do much for the observance of a country's laws, but after everything has been said these alone cannot make a man honest, a woman pure, or a child docile, and these three are the best assets of the state, the best materials for citizenship. An honest man, a pure woman, and a docile child are the specific products of religion in proportion as moral conviction is superior to legal ordinances.

Learning is the second item in our community-center program. By learning I mean information and knowledge, and this is conveyed to us for the most part, in the form of literature. We are the heirs of the ages in this respect, and when we survey the literature of the ages, and leave out what has come to us as religion, or what has been preserved by the representatives of religion, we would be poor indeed. I need but remind you of the superlative wisdom and beauty of the Old Testament; of Isaiah, Job, and the wonderful social and religious precepts of Moses. Then there is the New Testament, proclaiming its supreme doctrine in supreme letters. I need but remind you of the eloquent epistles of St. Paul and the sublime parables of the Master, and, above all, of that highest achievement of literature, as well as of thought, the Sermon on the Mount. Then there is all that best thought of Greek and Roman antiquity preserved for us by the monasteries during centuries both light and dark. Add to this the original contributions of the Middle Ages, which were almost exclusively the work of religious men and women. Today historians of every school are agreed that the monasteries of the church were not only the homes of religion, but they were the nurses of schools and scholarship, the libraries and repositories of learning and culture, and from them went forth the

big universities of the world, Oxford and Cambridge, Paris, Padua, Salamanca, and the rest.

It is a far cry from these to a school community center, but that should not prevent us from paying religion the debt we owe her in the fields of learning and literature. These fields, besides being useful and ennobling, also recreate; and again we have the recreational value of religion.

Then there is the field of fine art—fine art in all its phases, painting and sculpture and architecture and bronzes and laces and tapestries. No one denies the part played by religion in all ages as the promoter and patron in all these elevating, recreational factors of life. From the Temple of Solomon in ancient Jerusalem to the Church of St. Peter in modern Rome, from the humblest chapel to the most gorgeous cathedral, the architecture of religion has taught more craft, more devotion, more beauty, more poetry, than all the secular architecture of the world. Even the masterpieces of Greek art centered around the worship of the “unknown God” and found its most exalted expression in gods and goddesses and the porticoes of temples.

Perhaps the supreme contribution of religion to art is found in painting. Put religious paintings aside—take from them only the Madonnas—and our art galleries would lose half their attraction. We need but recall Michelangelo, Da Vinci, Murillo, Raphael, and the galleries of Florence, Dresden, and the Louvre.

What is true of the fine arts is equally true of the manual arts in their humbler way. The best achievements of today in this line are content to imitate because they cannot equal the work of the Middle Ages; and the work of the Middle Ages was for the most part done under the eye of the church, under the *aegis* of religion. Do the handcrafters of today realize their debt to religion for the joy and recreation which they find in their work?

Not the least recreational feature of the community center is dramatics in all its phases, including pageantry. The first play, the first actors, were of a religious nature; more than that, they were in reality acts of religion. They had their origin in the ritual of the Old Law and their dramatic influence has been going on throughout the world ever since and still is felt in the ritual of the

church ceremonies of today. As the Hebrew, so the Greek drama was essentially religious in subject and action. Not only its literary value but its lofty themes have made the Greek classics the unsurpassed, and perhaps the unsurpassable of dramas. The dramatic influence of the church's ritual and pageantry brought forth the miracle and the morality plays which were originally enacted in the church itself, or in the churchyard. Survivals of these are still seen in the well-known passion plays of Europe. From these plays the modern drama likewise took its rise. Perhaps I should say the "best" in modern drama so as not to malign the past.

There are many other reasons for including singing in the curriculum of the school center, not the least of which is the one that music always recreates; it is recreational in a high degree.

What has religion done to promote music? Is she not the heavenly maid, and is it not natural that religion should express itself in the symphony of sounds? And so, in fact, it has been. The Psalms of David have sounded down the centuries; they are chanted in our choirs today and will be chanted as long as religion and music shall live.

Under the Old Law the music of the Temple filled a very elaborate rôle. Prophets were elated by sacred music, and high priests sang the paeans of victory. In the primitive church St. Paul, writing to the Ephesians, tells them to sing "spiritual canticles and to make melody in their hearts to the Lord." The classic hymnology of the church goes back to Ambrose and Hilarius—the fourth century—and since their day music has ever been the handmaid of religious worship everywhere.

The emotions of religion have given rise to the sublimest music from the soul of the composer—Beethoven, Hayden, Palestrina, Mozart, Rossini, Gounod, and a host of others unbidden come to mind. It is not without reason that in the popular mind St. Cecilia is the recognized patroness of music, for the connection between religion and music is universal. Even the simpler strains of song of the community center are better and richer because of the sacred soil from which they sprang. They always recreate, and when

the religious note is added they give anew hope, aspiration, and vision.

It is difficult to overestimate the recreational value of music, for amid the discordant notes of daily life, harmonious sounds give a quiet and a poise of mind that lead to thoughts and intuitions better and deeper than those of formal argument. Did not Browning say:

The rest may reason and welcome,
Tis we musicians know.

The community center should be grateful to song; it should equally be grateful to religion.

Last but not least of the recreations of the community center is dancing. When kept within normal bounds and propriety it is an ideal recreation. The rhythm of music and of motion make even the present as well as the past fade away. It, too, is a creature comfort ordained by the Creator to be used and not abused, to be, like the rest, stepping-stones to higher things. Hence dancing in itself is good and not, as some may opine, the work of the devil. It teaches beauty of rhythm as perhaps nothing else does, and it is not surprising that from the earliest days it has at times been used in the direct service of religion. In measured stateliness it has become an act of worship, and so it was that the Jews danced before the Ark of the Holy of Holies; so in Spain children dance before the Blessed Sacrament. Thus religion has contributed to what is best in dancing, which is, as we have said, eminently recreational.

The program of a social center, while it does not include religion, must if it is intelligent have respect for it, because back of nearly all its exercises it is religion that supplies the uplifting character. Citizenship, without the dictates of the moral conscience, would be a slavish observance of man-made laws. Learning merely for learning's sake would soon become a mere vanity and lead to unsocial conceit. Art divorced from the spirit would lose its chief charm, for beneath the canvas or the stone the spirit senses hidden springs of delight. Even the manual arts lose much of their roughness when they are wrought with hands steeped in religion. The drama, to be true, must hold the mirror up to

nature, and if it neglects religion, the soul of nature, it soon degenerates into a lifeless and unworthy art. Music and dancing, limited to their naturally sensuous appeal, if not checked by a moral standard, will do more harm than good; here moral restraint, the voice of religion, is imperative.

But what practical deductions are we to draw from this brief study of the recreational value of religion? Since, as we have seen, religion inspires so much of the activities of a community center, it should encourage the workers, conscious of the dignity as well as the utility of their work. However, we must all admit that the lessons of the school center would for the most part be better taught in the home and the normal school, and hence in its last analysis a community center is only a second-best thing, but nevertheless a valuable substitute for home and school, in many neighborhoods made necessary by social and economic conditions.

Since religion is primarily not a recreational function, it is obvious that it has no formal place in a public community center, and this is good practice as well as good theory, on account of the varied confessions of faith of those who attend the center. In fact, if doctrinal religion or any of its practices were introduced, they would readily lead to discussion and disunion, and to the prejudice of the proper work of the school center. However, this should not lead to a hostile attitude on the part of the community-center workers toward religion, which has done so much for the historic background of the modern community center. It seems to me that the obvious attitude should be one of encouragement for religion and the spirit of religion. Wherever the religious feeling or character manifests itself it should always be sustained, and on it should be built the superstructure of life.

In a public community center religion should not be made the subject of strife or the object of derision. A man's religion, if he is sincere, is a sacred thing; it is the jewel of his life and no one should try to rob him of it. Above all there should be no proselytizing. If it must be done, the community center is not the place; there it will breed discord and discontent, if not destruction. Religious controversy at its best is difficult. It requires a peculiar

setting and trained exponents which a community center cannot give. Like many other profound problems of life and death, religion should be respected for all the good that it has done. Its discussion and criticism should be left for other minds and other times. The social center and its workers should be content to recognize with gratitude the recreational value of religion and with truth say in the words of Wisdom: "All good things have come to me together with her."